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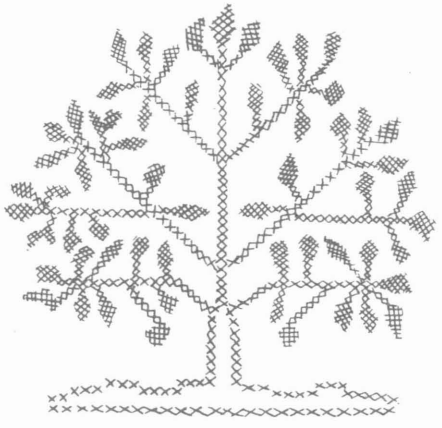
# OLDER PARENTS AND MATURE CHILDREN



## *Intergenerational Relationships*

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# OLDER PARENTS AND MATURE CHILDREN

## *Intergenerational Relationships*

Dorthy Taylor*

The problems of living with or near mature children are not so difficult to understand or solve. A desire to understand and to make the relationship work is necessary.

### *Fulfilling Needs*

Our needs are filled by whatever creates them. We need food when we are hungry; love when we feel lonely; and a sense of pride in our life when we feel worthless. In the best relationships, people fulfill the need they create in other people. Therefore, older parents and their children can provide emotional support for each other.

Personal accomplishment or fame and material wealth cannot fill the sense of emptiness a person feels when he doubts his own lovability. Some needs can be fulfilled only by another person and some only by oneself. Knowing which is which and being willing to take the risk of making your needs known, admitting that you are human and need another person as much as you need yourself, is the first step on the way to becoming complete.

Older parents may try to live their children's lives because they do not feel secure about themselves. This relationship is superficial and may demand attention from a partner or mature children that is never the right kind or enough to be satisfying. Other people seek a sense of togetherness in their career or job and then cannot understand why success leaves them feeling incomplete. Both approaches place unrealistic burdens; one on a relationship, the other on oneself.

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In addition to his own identity-crisis, the middle-aged person faces the changing nature of the generation gap between mature adults and their aging parents. This separation or gap between elderly parents and their middle-aged children can produce a feeling of guilt in the children if the children feel compelled to care for their elderly parents. When caretaking is not pleasurable, adult children feel guilty about what they "should" do and the feeling that they do not really want to do this.

### *Changing Roles*

When the older adult becomes dependent on an adult child, a series of problems can begin. The parent may begin to lack confidence in his judgment and become dependent on the mature child. This is a role reversal — the adult child begins to parent the older adult. In effect, the child becomes the parent, and the older parent becomes the child in this relationship. Mature adults may find it difficult to assume responsibility for parents whose earlier primary role was to be responsible for them.

Another strain on the mature child-older parent relationship is the demand on time. Mature children primarily feel responsible for their own families and may resent the time needed to care for older parents. Too, adult children often get impatient with the slower-moving world of the aged.

There is often a role reversal between men and women as they become older. As women age, they usually assume the majority of household as well as family responsibilities. Elderly men begin to share their family-head

chores and become more submissive, gentle and retiring. This role change may be hard for mature children to accept. Older adults seem to be more accepting of role changes than their children.

Change may create confusion and complicate the response of adult children to the needs of dependent parents. The change in relationships between older parents and mature children reminds the children that this period of dependence is facing them.

Mature children may contribute to elderly parents' loss of self-esteem through hesitations, hostilities or dishonesty in their relationships. In sharing hurts and weaknesses, trust is developed. Trust helps overcome problems that seem hopeless when they are faced alone. Trust draws parents and children closer together. There is a tragic loss when adult children and aging parents lose touch.

## *Strengthening Relationships*

The idea of "I want what I want when I want it" is damaging in any interpersonal relationship. But emotional fences that are strained, rusting from lack of use or have broken down from abuse can be mended. Building or strengthening relationships between mature children and parents takes time and costs money. Keeping emotional temperatures comfortable may be difficult.

Families may find the following suggestions helpful in strengthening relationships between older parents and mature children.

1) *Face reality* - selfishness, suspicion and dishonesty make life difficult.

2) *Adapt to change* - an indication that one is profiting from experience. The ability to adjust is an indication of maturity.

3) *Control anxieties* - tension and anxiety are natural. Coping with them is a skill.

4) *Give of yourself* - find satisfaction in giving and sharing. This is a constructive aim in life.

5) *Consider others* - relate to others in a consistent manner with mutual satisfaction and helpfulness.

6) *Curb hostility* - use human energy for creative and constructive pursuits. Aggressive, destructive impulses are emotional troublemakers.

7) *Learn to love* - loving is caring in the broadest sense of the word. It is enjoying others, liking people, giving affection and letting others love you.

## *Maintaining Independence*

For older adults, a good relationship with mature children depends to a large extent on the oldster's ability to manage for himself. The increasing dependency of a parent upon a child or a continuing reliance of child upon the parent creates a situation that society does not sanction and children and parents resent. The ideal situation is when an older parent and his mature child function well, but independently.

Middle-agers feel a pull in ties and responsibilities from children and grandchildren and from aging parents. Mature adults need the acceptance and respect of married children. Their own aging parents now look to them for help in many decisions that have to be made in later years of life. Fortunately, many middle-aged adults are physically and financially flexible enough to serve adequately as the generation between without straining their own resources.

Many older parents dread dependency on children. Different attitudes and beliefs about childrearing and social problems may obstruct open communication. Adult children are reluctant to accept advice from an older parent — and older parents feel a strong need to give advice.

Most older adults live in families; more older women than older men live alone. The majority of older adults prefer living alone when health, safety, and economics allow it. Total economic dependence of older adults on children is far less common in the U.S. than in other countries. Economic support is usually in the form of providing housing and maintenance for an aged parent.

Giving of oneself and sharing younger family members is a gift from adult children to older parents. The extended family — children and grandchildren, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews — maintains the older person socially. It is the family network that helps keep older persons attuned to both the family and the community.

## Handling Conflict

Some sociologists and psychologists recommend the practice of "mutual avoidance" for those families in which intergenerational conflict exists. It may be wise to decrease the dependence of one generation on the other when older parents and adult children do not get along. This means fewer personal contacts, not forcing children to give economic support to older parents and not sharing a common residence.

Fortunately, this conflict does not mar relationships between many older parents and their adult children. Most families find a warm and close relationship during the mature years. Differences may continue between generations, but they usually level off. Differences are not so strong or pronounced that many mature children are unable to enjoy life with aging parents.

## Grandparenting

The most satisfying period of grandparenthood is usually when grandchildren are small. Today, most people become grandparents in their middle or late forties. Few adults over sixty-five have very young grandchildren. Teenage grandchildren are usually independent of their grandparents, so the grandparent role is basically an inactive one for most elderly people.

Grandparent roles are varied. Grandparenting may mean serving as a reservoir of family wisdom, being a parent substitute, being a distant or honored fixture (present only for special occasions), being fun seeker and playmate for a grandchild, using a grandchild as an extension of oneself into another generation, or to be a better grandparent than a parent.

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For the older adult, the deepest relationships come from the immediate family and kinfolks of their same generation. There is a closeness between generations, but older parents are reluctant to lean too heavily on their children for fear of disrupting the adult child's life. The lives of older adults serve as a resource for younger people to use in patterning their own lives when they reach their later years. Ways of handling retirement, family relations, grief, poverty or illness are lessons to be learned from watching older adults.

It is a simple task to assess years in determining age. A more difficult chore is to assess the strength or weakness of human relationships. What starts as a rewarding close relationship between young parents and their children can likewise end as a warm closeness for older parents and their mature children if it is nurtured daily.


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